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**“Voices of possibility and hope”: What at-risk students can tell  
teachers about classroom engagement**

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# **“Voices of possibility and hope”: What at-risk students can tell teachers about classroom engagement**

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*Secondary school students who had disengaged from mainstream classrooms have demonstrated that they had maintained hope in achieving a positive outcome from education. In a long-running schools-university project that employed a “students-as-researchers” method to investigate apparent low aspiration for tertiary education, at-risk students enthusiastically produced high quality results. This paper outlines the project and addresses the features that the participants state were instrumental in their re-engagement and that have re-connected them with formal education. These features are then considered in relation to maintaining the educational engagement of at-risk students in mainstream classrooms. The production of an award-winning DVD, conceptualized and created by the students, illustrates the quality of their engagement and provides a starting point for discussion.*

We need to find ways to make student knowledges the basis of school direction and curricula ... If we care about larger issues of justice and liberation, we must listen to our students. They have voices of possibility and hope (Butler, 1998, p. 108).

A university-schools research project was commenced in 1992 to investigate the apparent low aspiration for higher education of students in schools serving low socio-economic areas. This social justice project was premised on a belief that many of the high school students had the capacity to undertake university study and that research was needed to expose barriers to the attainment of their educational potential. Through participatory action research (PAR), the project utilized a “students-as-researchers” approach (Fielding, 2001; Steinberg & Kincheloe, 1998) that had a principal aim of finding out from the students themselves what they believed the central problems to be and then to involve them both as primary researchers and as designers of potential solutions. In the past fifteen years, almost thirty schools have participated in the Student Action Research for University Access (SARUA) Project.

While participant schools have credited the SARUA project with increasing a general awareness of tertiary education options among their student cohort, many stories of individual student empowerment have been reported by the project participants. These students’ insights represent “voices of possibility and hope” for themselves and others who are too often in schools where their knowledges “are ignored and/or intentionally shut out” (Butler, 1998, p. 108). For example, a group of Year 10 students whose classroom behavior had seen them marginalized to a ‘last chance’ program, recently undertook research through the SARUA project into low tertiary aspiration and limited progression to university of the student cohort of their school. This resulted in a DVD created by the group that revealed the concerns of their peers and that demonstrated through interviews with current university students that these concerns could be overcome. The DVD has been widely acclaimed,

winning prestigious awards, with some of the project students speaking confidently about their experiences and presenting the DVD at education conferences.

This paper focuses primarily on the insights of the producers of the DVD and other “at-risk” student participants in identifying the features of the SARUA project that enabled them to demonstrate their continued, though masked, connections to education. By examining these features, it will be shown that, rather than disengaging from formal education, the students maintained some degree of optimism that education could still provide some personal benefit. It will also be shown that the students have articulated a set of pedagogic principles that can inform classroom practice aimed at maintaining the engagement of students considered at risk for disengagement. A secondary aim of the paper is to suggest a model for university-schools collaborative programs that increases the aspirations to higher education of students from under-represented backgrounds whilst enabling them to gain knowledge of tertiary education options, improve their academic and research skills and develop their personal skills, such as self-esteem and leadership.

While drawing broadly on the participants’ views, this paper also draws from doctoral research that examined the influence of the SARUA project. This research employed a PAR methodology grounded in critical theory (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000), with the analysis being influenced by social constructivist theory. For the purpose of this paper, students at-risk can be defined as belonging to a group that, due to social and cultural factors, has limited, if any, power to make a difference in the education system or to take full advantage of its benefits. For the most disadvantaged students, this can be manifest in the form of marginalization from and resistance to formal education. These students are the least likely to see themselves reflected in schools’ curricula or to develop positive relationships with teachers (Vibert & Shields, 2003).

### **At-risk students?**

In 2006, a group of at-risk Year 10 students whose classroom behavior had seen them marginalized to a ‘last chance’ program attached to their secondary school agreed to participate in the SARUA project. These six students had been referred to the last chance program because they:

- were disengaged;
- had incurred disciplinary interventions (suspensions, etc.);
- were unused to building and maintaining effective relationships;
- lacked goals and plans for the future; and
- exhibited poor literacy due to various combinations of lack of attendance, poor behavior, lack of direction and confidence. (Smith & Woodward, 2007).

The students, some of whom at first considered participation in the SARUA project as a means of escaping other school requirements, soon became fully engaged in the research investigating the school’s low tertiary aspiration and progression rates. When they analyzed the responses of their peers to their research questions, they found that there was a general unawareness or misunderstanding of basic information about university (e.g., entry requirements, costs, transport, ‘fitting in’). To address these issues, they decided to create a DVD. None of the project students had previous experience in film production but were assisted by a teacher and, by the end of the year, they had created a 22-minute informative and entertaining production, revealing the concerns of their peers and demonstrating through interviews with current university students that these could be overcome. Launched at a

students-as-researchers conference in December, 2006, the DVD has been widely acclaimed with some of the project students speaking with increasing confidence about their experiences, presenting the DVD at subsequent education conferences and winning prestigious awards. For some of the participants, the experience was life-changing, opening up new possibilities within education. One of the group, for example, who prior to his participation in this project was bored with school and facing suspension, has been nominated School Captain for 2008. The work of these students and the changes in their attitudes towards schooling have helped other students in their school to raise their expectations of formal education and is having a positive effect on the culture of the school and on student-teacher relationships. The DVD has also been shown in other schools and student forums where it has positively influenced young people to re-consider the benefits of formal education. Its success is due mainly to the enthusiasm of the student film-makers and the presentation of the issues from the point-of-view of the students themselves.

The SARUA project through which the research was undertaken has resulted in many school-based, student-inspired improvement activities. The DVD project is, however, the most illustrative of what can be accomplished by 'disengaged' students and of how they have been prepared to invest their energies in an educational pursuit. It therefore raises questions regarding labels frequently applied to such students such as 'at-risk', 'disadvantaged' and 'disaffected', and certainly dismisses their categorization as 'dumb' or 'lost causes' (Riley & Rustique-Forrester, 2002). It also challenges low expectations of such students regarding educational potential and interest.

### **The path to disengagement**

The students' accomplishments suggest that, regardless of the labels attached to them, they had not given up on education even if their behavior suggested otherwise. This raises the question that, if students such as these maintained the "promise of engagement" (Vibert & Shields, 2003, p. 229) with schooling and had retained some latent hope that education could offer them a means of improving their life chances, why had they apparently disengaged from it? One answer is that hope, far from being passive, implicitly involves a critical reflective attitude and dissatisfaction about current circumstances and those matters that inhibit progress (Halpin, 2003). This notion is supported by an Australian report (Australian Centre for Equity through Education & the Australian Youth Research, 2001) that found that disengaged young people saw education as offering the potential to open their future prospects, but frequently felt devalued by their schools; they were also aware that the pathways generally offered to them were less valued and their negative school experiences mostly ruled out the option of completing senior schooling and, by extension, university education.

These conclusions are also supported in the US through research suggesting that disengagement may affect as many as two-thirds of high school students (Smyth, 2006). These are students who "are not necessarily troublesome, but for whom the middle class institution of schooling has become completely banal, meaningless and without purpose, except as a reasonably pleasant place in which to meet and socialize with one's friends" (p. 286). The potential meaninglessness of formal education has been taken up by Levin (2000) who cites a considerable body of evidence showing that "disadvantaged students tend to receive the least interesting, most passive forms of instruction, and are given the least opportunity to participate actively in their own education" (p. 164), leading from low levels of engagement with education to high rates of dropping out. Similarly, McInerney and

McInerney (2006) state that “many secondary classrooms are crushingly dull places in which to learn” (p. 239). The boredom created by such pedagogy “conveys a deep sense of disappointment” (Fallis & Opatow, 2003, p. 108). Where school becomes alienating and irrelevant to students’ aspirations, they may “see themselves as having little choice other than to walk away from it” (Smyth & Hattam, 2001, p. 403), investing their interest and motivation elsewhere.

### **Student voice**

Regardless of the above research highlighting the failure of school systems to meet the needs of disadvantaged students, there is a pervasive view that young people are themselves to blame for academic failure and dropping out of school (Smyth & Hattam, 2001). Generally, though, we only define the problem “from the outside” (p. 401). We need, then, to “excavate the meanings” of concepts such as disengagement from the inside and to then use these new understandings to help make a difference to the lives of the most disadvantaged (Smyth, 2006, p. 288). Social justice requires schools to listen specifically to the voices of those who are the most at risk (and, therefore, the least likely to be heard) on issues that directly affect their educational outcomes (Riley & Rustique-Forrester, 2002; Thomson, 2004). Rudduck and Flutter (2004) observed that “disengagement can be reversed if students feel that significant others in the school are able to see and acknowledge some of their strengths” (p. 70).

Creating spaces for student voice is a key element of the SARUA Project. This project is premised on a belief that many students from ‘at-risk’ backgrounds have the capacity to undertake university study and that research is needed to expose barriers to the attainment of their educational potential. To this end, SARUA utilizes a “students-as-researchers” approach (Fielding, 2001; Steinberg & Kincheloe, 1998) in which the students affected by the issues take a lead role in both the research and the design of potential solutions. Based on Habermas’ (1984, 1987) critical theory, the PAR methodology that informs the SARUA Project aims to help the students investigate their shared reality in order to change it, and “transforms reality in order to investigate it” (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000, p. 592). It can illuminate some of the “hidden forces” (p. 573) that impact on students’ educational opportunities through “making the familiar unfamiliar (and making the unfamiliar familiar)” (p. 573). Educational research, according to Kemmis (2005) should fuel “the development of education both in the interests of individuals (especially those disadvantaged in access to and success in education) and for the common good” (p. 9). The SARUA Project is an example of student participation in education reform that embodies Kemmis’ principles of PAR through directly involving educationally disadvantaged students in research that relates to their real-life educational barriers.

Following the principles of PAR, the SARUA project employs the action research spiral of planning, acting, observation, and reflection, and consists of three main stages:

1. Each year, a number of secondary schools serving low-income communities are invited to participate in the project, with groups ranging from six to twenty-four students selected by the schools. These students attend an initial two-day training and planning session at the university. This session deals with some of the social issues affecting young people in their schools and identifies factors affecting their lack of access to university. Participants also develop skills in designing and implementing research and gain direct knowledge about and experience of

the university and its culture. At the end of this session, students plan their school-based projects to be conducted throughout the year.

2. Students refine and carry out their action research projects in their local school environments. This is accomplished through weekly school meetings between the students and their appointed teachers with occasional visits from university researchers. The school-based projects involve researching some aspect of the issues they have identified relating to low tertiary aspiration and access and then designing and implementing relevant activities to redress the situation.
3. Towards the end of the school year, participants return to the university to reflect on and document their research and action. Successes and pitfalls are identified and recommendations for further action and research are outlined. In recent years, this phase has included in a student voice conference at which the groups present their findings, through means such as Powerpoint display, DVD, written reports and discussion, to a gathering of their peers and education professionals.

### **Project Outcomes**

Through their engagement in research activities, SARUA participants claim to have developed empowering skills and knowledge in a variety of areas including enhanced academic skills, confidence in team work, and critical reflection (Bland, 2007). In particular, students have expressed significantly increased knowledge about the flexibility of university education that, they realized, made higher education viable for them. For example,

- universities have a flexible timetable;
- university students do not have to attend every day;
- it is possible to attend university part-time;
- university courses are not simply 9-5;
- students can also have paid work.

While these understandings may be commonplace to most secondary school students, they were ‘eye-opening’ for the SARUA participants, some of whom even expressed surprise, and pleasure, that university students are not required to wear uniforms.

One of the issues frequently raised by students is the lack of role models to give them information about university. For example, one interviewee stated:

*...I didn't have any peers or elders who had gone to university.... I had nobody to ask, hey, what's it really like? (Bajar, Brennan, Deen, James, Nguyen & Nguyen, 1993)*

Similarly, another group, in relation to the tertiary awareness of the school's Polynesian students, said:

*...so they don't have the support of people to say, 'hey I've been to university, I enjoyed it, it was good, you should go' (Year 11 focus group).*

In fact, misrecognition had led this student group to accept that they were excluded from university on the basis of their race. The turn-around in students thinking about university is often demonstrated by comments that suggest their imaginations have been charged; as one student stated:

*...you see a different side of what it's going to be like and you can picture yourself there (Year 12 female).*

As well as benefits for individual participants, their schools have benefited from SARUA participation. Obtaining insider perspectives on student issues helps schools to

identify the ways in which their policies and practices impact on students. For example, in one study students revealed that “at least a third” of the school’s Indigenous students had encountered racism from teachers with the highest levels of racism (48%) experienced by lower grade students (Atweh, Cobb, Crouch, Curtis-Silk, et al., 1995). This research, while discomfiting, provided essential data in addressing the early school-leaving of Indigenous students. It highlights a key advantage of peer research as it is very unlikely that such openness of comment could have been achieved by teachers or other school staff (Rudduck & Flutter, 2004). Research findings generated by the school-based groups have shown that SARUA students are able to deliver data that can help schools to build a better understanding of their local communities. At one school, for example, the work of SARUA students resulted in a “mind-shift” (teacher, interview) among staff that included discussions of how Indigenous culture could be recognized within the school curriculum. The student participants themselves set a “benchmark” for other Indigenous students, giving them the “confidence to recognize their culture but also talk about their culture with their peers” (teacher, interview).

Further, there were benefits for the teachers coordinating the SARUA project at the school level. Some coordinators have reported that, although there were many other demands on their time, the project offered an opportunity to be involved in a meaningful enterprise with students that enabled them to work with and understand students in new ways. One teacher, for instance, observed that

*when they go to uni, to the uni campus, I mean it's a totally different kettle of fish isn't it, when you get away from [the school], and they're basically, you know, confident, polite young adults generally* (interview).

Increasing tertiary awareness and access, however, are the key aims of the project and the students’ research can focus on a variety of barriers that inhibit achievement or interest in completing school. Among the school-based action following the students’ research have been the establishment of homework centers to provide quiet areas and support for study, a lunch-time radio station to improve the ambience of one school, a ‘tertiary shadowing’ project to make up for a lack of role models in the community, a room for Indigenous students to increase feelings of belonging and to provide a place for study support, and the aforementioned DVD.

### **Engaging features**

As well as creating change in their own lives and their schools, SARUA participants have been forthcoming about the aspects of the project that engaged them and that they believe should be features of all their regular classroom education.

- ***The establishment of a community of research, mutual respect and parity of esteem***

When asked what reduced their apprehension about participating in a university sponsored project, one focus group responded that it was firstly the attitudes of the university SARUA facilitators “being nice to us and stuff” (Female, Year 12).

The other students agreed:

*And the way we were spoken to ... they spoke to us, made us feel comfortable I guess. Nobody looked down on us or something and like, no you don't go here... (Female, Year 12).*



*Yeah, like everyone was treated equally (Female, Year 12).*

From the start, the SARUA project is designed to build equality between all participants. A commitment to a “parity of esteem” in research collaborations does not require the abrogation of leadership (Grundy, 1996) but, rather, by opening up multiple opportunities, leadership becomes associated with tasks rather than particular positions. As remarked by Carlozzi, Carlozzi and Harris (2004), this is a more reasonable aim for participatory researchers than equality as it acknowledges differences whilst authority and influence remain more or less equal for all participants.

Insiders, though they may be low in the official structures of power within the education system, have extensive and long-term knowledge of the immediate problems as well as the contexts in which they occur (Bland & Atweh, 2004). With a shared common commitment towards the content of the research, the role of professional researchers is to offer their experience in organizing research processes as well as encouraging some theorizing behind the immediate data obtained (Greenwood & Levin, 2000), whilst the role of students is to bring their own knowledge and expertise to the research.

- ***Real life, relevant problems***

“If we find interest or meaning in something we pay attention and tend to learn it. Few things are more straightforward in life” (Hart, 2000, p. 23). The enthusiasm engendered through relevance is clearly demonstrated by an Indigenous student group, who were motivated by a desire to increase community involvement in their school and thereby improve the school’s poor image. Strategies such as positive publicity and presentations to primary students in feeder schools were suggested as ways in which the community could be better informed about the school:

*then people would think ‘Oh yeah, [our school] is actually a decent school, you know, they’re trying to help the kids out’, and then, so, more people are going to send their kids to [our school], aren’t they. So if it was in the local newspaper, people read about it and other people would get interested in it (Year 9 male).*

The creation of an Indigenous students’ room at the school by the SARUA group illustrates the way in which the research is connected to the students’ realities. The students’ research found that the high rates of early school leaving and unexplained absences among Indigenous students in their school were the result of a lack of any feeling of belonging. They demonstrated this through a powerful slide presentation to a student conference showing the absence of Indigenous students in any official school literature, despite some significant achievements among the cohort. Establishing the dedicated room was the beginning of addressing this problem and was subsequently followed by a concerted effort to change the culture of the school. In 2007, the school formally acknowledged the academic and sporting achievements of its Indigenous students at awards ceremonies, ensured the Aboriginal flag was flown on a daily basis, and helped to create an ‘avenue’ of totem-poles painted by the group.

- ***Ownership of the process***

Most students have more autonomy and responsibility in their out-of-school lives than within education systems (Rudduck & Flutter, 2004) with little ownership or control of the schooling experience offered to them. Within the SARUA project as much as within school classrooms, experiencing choice and control over learning activities maintains motivation and enhances achievement (McInerney & McInerney, 2006). Such a sense of ownership was an unusual experience for some groups in the school setting; with professional staff in the

project stepping back to encourage students to make important decisions, feelings of ownership of the process and commitment to the project ensued. Asked why he was committed to the project, one student, Khu, commented,

*Well, we wanted to see something finished - I didn't just want to leave and think what else could I have done with it, that sort of thing (Year 11 male).*

Even when other possibilities beckoned them, such as sport, free time and other school activities, the students agreed that “it would have been like letting the team down” (Year 11 female) and “it would have been like being a quitter” (Year 11 male). Another added:

*when you actually achieve something, like with the homework centre, it does actually give that commitment more knowing, it was kind of like, that it was our project - we did that. So you just want to keep going and make it better (Year 12 female).*

For DVD producer and “star”, Ash, this led to opportunities “to become more of a leader in classes – help other people in class, try to be a role model for other students” (interview). He added that he had developed

*great relationships with staff members - because my attitude has changed and I'm not so much of a problem student as some teachers might call you – they see me as someone they can have a friendship with. I'll show them respect, they show me respect – they help me when I need help because they know that I want to succeed.*

- ***Ownership of outcomes that help others***

Students reported an increased sense of purpose when they could see the ways in which their activities were having a positive impact on others in their schools. Being told by his peers that, after watching the DVD, they realized they had the chance to attend university made Ash “happy to think the video changed someone’s mind” (interview).

A sense of ownership of their project together with the closeness in age to their audience were identified as major factors in the success both of the DVD and of a school promotion of university options, devised by another group of SARUA students as a drama performance. The students felt that their play was able to convey a stronger message to their audience than the school’s usual method of handing out university promotional literature which would not inspire students like themselves. They believed that, though they had some help from the SARUA coordinator, the play and the resulting positive outcomes were theirs: “our performance was massive, but it is ours, and we’re pretty proud of it” (Year 10 female).

Similarly, according to another group of students, although their school devoted a week to tertiary education information for senior students, the manner of presentation led to students failing to pay attention: “people won’t just sit there and listen”. However, when the SARUA students devised a mentoring program “they did take it all in because it’s - it’s where they want to get involved and it’s like learning first hand” (Year 12 focus group).

Feelings of ownership of the outcomes and the satisfaction in directly helping others have been expressed by many of the SARUA project participants. One student, for example, stated that it was “good to have the chance to do something useful for the school” (Year 11 male). This feeling was also reported by a student who expressed a great sense of satisfaction with his work, “knowing that the report I have participated in will help future Polynesian students for years to come” (Year 12 male). Commitment to the project grew from a desire to help with the problems being faced by other students. Empathic imagination was used in these cases to help give voice to the marginalized and to those who were absent from the collaborative process (Grundy, 1996). As one of the group stated,

*[we] achieved something from all this research, it wasn't just doing all this stuff for nothing* (Year 11 female).

- ***Cooperation in teams rather than competition***

Perhaps surprisingly, most students in the SARUA project observed that they had very little opportunity to work collaboratively in the normal school setting. By contrast, the SARUA project required students to work as teams and this resulted not only in creative activities but opportunities to work with 'strangers' and to develop additional skills in leadership and teamwork. The creative energy generated by the groups was summed up by one teacher who, traveling back to school from the university workshop said they were "like a bus-full of budgies!" (interview).

One outcome of working in teams is that the students developed a sense of closeness with one another. This feature of groups was mentioned several times during the focus group and seemed to have had a profound and positive affect on many of the students. For instance, one student stated that "we've just kind of come together a lot closer than we were" (student focus group). The final report writing sessions were emphasized as having the greatest impact in this regard during which the students became "a lot closer" and "more comfortable" with each other. Another student (student focus group) in the same group commented that "we don't usually work together – we don't usually talk together either."

Yet another (student focus group) highlighted the experience of working with people with whom she normally would not have associated in the normal course of a school day. The value for the students was not just in relation to completing the SARUA project, but as a skill for the future. For example, as one student put it, this was not just a learning process but the opportunity to meet people of different backgrounds and personalities "because you'll meet other people at uni and have to work with them" (student focus group).

- ***Taking risks***

The SARUA project provides a space for a certain amount of risk-taking. Being a novice researcher from a background of educational disadvantage presents certain risks for students entering the SARUA project and in entering the unknown territory of a university campus. Further, being adversely labeled by their peers and the potential risk of failure present risks and these possibilities must be addressed at the commencement stages of SARUA. The risk of failure can be minimized during the introductory workshops, as can the other identified risks for students. In particular, establishing the basis of radical collegiality (Fielding, 2001) is a major objective of these two-day sessions through which the participants interact and share knowledge as respected equals. Further, in acting to minimize risk to students, consultation with them is essential at all stages to monitor such aspects as the relationships between participants and the impact of SARUA involvement on individuals.

While protecting students from unnecessary risk is essential, the action research cycle of the project provides students with the opportunity to take risks in their project work through trialing ideas, re-evaluating them and working out where things need to be re-thought. For example, a group whose research led to the establishment of a homework centre in the school were concerned that it was not being used by as many senior students as they expected. Further research among their peers suggested a non-academic incentive was necessary and they introduced a successful voucher system entitling participants to a free burger after three visits in one week. They also changed the name to create a 'cool' image

(Year 11 focus group) for the centre. This way of working was, for these students, very different to their class work in which risk-taking was discouraged.

*I think, if we just do what we think we should do, you know, you can see if it helps. If it doesn't we can do it again and do it a bit differently. It's all good* (Year 10, male).

- **Having fun**

An aspect of the SARUA project that may surprise some educators is that many of the students saw their role in the research projects as “fun”. This also seems to have surprised a number of the students. One early research report communicated the enthusiasm of the Year 11 and 12 student researchers who, in describing the survey process of their research, stated that it was “all and more than expected. It was not merely interesting, but enjoyable” (Borowicz, Davis, James, Le, Nguyen, Owens, et al., 1993, p. 2). DVD star, Ash, said that he didn't think that the project would be useful, but might be more fun than school (interview). He then found that

*it was a challenge and I like challenges - I got some good friends through it and it was fun. You learnt new things each week – it wasn't the same boring stuff. I'd never done anything like it.*

During the course of the DVD production project, the students did not view their participation as “work” (Smith & Woodward, 2007):

*Towards the end of 2006 (nine months into the project), in response to a comment on the considerable literacies he had learnt, one of the researchers replied, “I don't like English, this isn't English. We are having fun!”. While engaged and having fun, they were experiencing multi-literacy learning in the context of real life, authentic tasks. They explored ways of thinking and learning, applying technology and other strategies and applications and practised and contextualized multi-literacies.* (p. 13)

Students from other schools agreed that there was enjoyment in the SARUA process, regardless of the success or otherwise of their particular project. As one student said,

*it was more fun than what you'd expect - you sort of think about researching, like, you can't think of yourself doing that* (focus group).

A student in another group went so far as to say that SARUA “is full on pretty exciting” (focus group) while a group of Indigenous students also assessed their participation as “fun” with comments such as “after I got into it I really enjoyed it” (focus group) and “It was fun, like, just, yeah, organizing it all” (focus group).

One student group strongly suggested that this feature should be used by the SARUA facilitators in promoting the project to potential participants:

*..it is fun, like, tell the people that take over for next year, yeah, let more people know about it, get more involved, yeah, like have fun just doing it and stuff. Like, 'cos it's nothing you have to stress about, like it's not hard, like it's not like you're sitting there ripping your hair going 'Oh my God I've got this to do', 'cos it's not hard* (focus group).

### **Scaffolded support**

Essential in achieving these outcomes has been the provision of safe and risk-free spaces through which students can develop their creative, empathic and critical imaginations (Bland, 2007) for both their own and others' benefit. This supportive space is an element of the scaffolded approach of the SARUA project through which students work in collaboration with and alongside teachers, peers and university researchers, employing the Vygotskian

concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The ZPD is described as the difference between what a student can achieve alone and what they can achieve with the scaffolded assistance of a more advanced partner (Renshaw, 1998). Renshaw makes it clear that this does not conflict with the idea of parity of esteem among the participants as, while there is essentially a difference in knowledge of the partners in ZPD, that does not imply a power differential. It is simultaneously the co-construction of knowledge and a process of socialization, becoming a member of a community, with a potentially transforming influence on identity. The ZPD creates a space in which students can “become participants in ongoing practices of a community, even if they are only partially and peripherally engaged at first” (p. 88).

While it is important that the students find enjoyment in their participation in the project, it is also essential that, if their situation is to change, they need to find empowerment and this requires a change of attitude or habitus. The Bourdieuan concept of “doxa” relates to the core values and discourses of a field (e.g., the school) which tend to be viewed as inherently true and necessary. A doxic attitude entails “bodily and unconscious submission to conditions that are in fact quite arbitrary and contingent” (Webb et al., 2002, p. xi) and, therefore, form part of students’ habitus that they, initially at least, convey to the SARUA project. This attitude, uncritically accepting what appears to be the inevitable, demonstrates a need for critical pedagogy, offering hope and democratic possibilities. This means the creation of spaces “which allow students to ask ‘why’ and to ‘think differently’” (Noone & Cartwright, 2005, p. 4). This conforms to Freire’s concept of “conscientization” (1998) and assists in shifting the students’ perspectives of ways in which they have been shaped by their schools and communities.

Allied closely to conscientization is the ability to participate in the discourses of power. “We all make sense of the world with the discourse we have access to” and “self-silencing” (Smyth & Hattam, 2001, p. 411) can occur where students do not have the language to describe their experience. People from disenfranchised groups, such as at-risk students, need access to a language of power through which they can identify and reformulate their shared knowledge and experiences (Saul, 2001). Through participation in SARUA research activities, students have a chance to participate in the discourse of education and develop a critical understanding of its assumptions and processes of their world.

A dramatic illustration of the project’s potential for students to find empowerment through immersion in the education discourse involved Jean, an Indigenous student, who had returned to school to complete senior studies. Through her SARUA experience, the notion of attending university became part of daily conversation, culminating in her enrolment in a university course. As observed by the school’s SARUA facilitator, Jean had never previously seen herself as a university student and she doubted whether the idea had even occurred to her that it was a possibility:

*I don’t think anywhere along her checkered career at school would she have ever thought of that as an aspiration, till, till that last year ... I think through doing SARUA, ... they talked about who went to university, why wouldn’t they go to university. And her and (her friends) talked about that, yeah, they will go to university ... it became part of their conversation about when they would go to university. And then their conversations went, well how would we get in? (Interview).*

The ability to picture themselves at university and as university students was a major outcome of SARUA for many participants who had previously been unable to identify as a

potential university student. A critical element of this development was an immersion in the language of tertiary education, accruing essential cultural capital in this form of institutional currency (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) and its incorporation into their everyday conversation. DVD creator, Ash, for example, had not thought past being a construction worker or working as a supermarket shelf-stacker for a while. However, he had “learned things in the project that led to me thinking of things I want to be a part of” (Ash, interview).

### **Implications for classrooms**

What, then, are the implications of these observations for regular classrooms? In summary, the key features of the SARUA project that students recommend as supporting engagement are:

- the establishment of a community of research, mutual respect and parity of esteem
- real life, relevant problems connected with students’ own realities;
- student ownership of the process;
- student ownership of outcomes that help others
- cooperation in teams rather than competition;
- the opportunity to learn from mistakes, take risks, and trial ideas;
- having fun.

These features are scaffolded by a process of conscientization, overcoming misrecognition and doxic attitudes, and empowerment through access to the discourse of education.

These elements of the SARUA project are of significance in that at-risk students themselves have been instrumental in identifying them as features of educational engagement that can be extrapolated to assist classroom teachers to maintain the connectivity of at-risk students. The students-as-researchers model exemplified by the project has also been supported by Fallis and Opatow (2003) as a means of re-engaging marginalized students. It is not suggested here that all learning activities should utilize the model in its entirety, but that the features complement policies and practices designed to create inclusive, democratic and caring learning communities in the classroom (Larivee, 2000; Riley & Rustique- Forrester, 2002). These features can be conscripted into use in classrooms to complement and enact practices emphasizing a wholistic pedagogical approach, engaging all students in more meaningful ways with their education. For example, “Productive Pedagogies” (Department of Education and The Arts, Queensland, 2002), which builds on Newmann’s “authentic pedagogies (1996), proposes practices that are able to incorporate flexible and dialogic approaches to teaching and learning that indicate openness and reciprocity. These are grouped under the four categories of supportive environment, intellectual quality, connectedness, and difference.

These principles are common to many current approaches to engage at-risk students in their education (Flutter & Rudduck, 2004). Similar principles were advocated by Haberman (1991) in his condemnation of typical teaching practices in the US at the time, which he termed “a pedagogy of poverty” (p. 16). Haberman claimed that, rather than the dulling routines predominant in schools serving educationally disadvantaged communities, teachers should employ practices that involved students in real-life, meaningful investigations that centered on democratic participation, social justice and reflection. Haberman’s paper has been, according to Smith (2005), one of the most requested articles published in *Phi Delta Kappan* in the previous fourteen years and is as relevant in today’s education environment as

it was when first published. Currency has been added to the debate by bell hooks (2003) in moving from a pedagogy of poverty towards a “pedagogy of hope” (p. i).

Building on the latent hope of at-risk students means providing opportunities for them to perceive genuine possibilities for themselves, “openings through which they can move” (Greene, 1995, p. 14), allowing the overcoming of “the inertia of habit” (Dewey, 1934, in Greene, 1995, p. 21). That disengaged students such as those who created the DVD referred to in this paper were willing to invest significant time and energy in an education project that directly involved them in research demonstrates that they maintained some sense of optimism that education could be instrumental for them. These students have subsequently re-engaged with mainstream education and achieved positive academic results for themselves as well as creating improved opportunities for their peers. In its ideal form, then, the SARUA project presents a model that complements current attempts to bring school systems and pedagogies closer to the realities of the lives of their students and to build on the voices of hope as expressed by educationally at-risk students.

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